

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Laura Mulqueen
Wings

I met my devil the day my boy was born, the day flesh spilled in clots over the edge of the hospital table into the slop bucket; a nurse held it, wordlessly wiping that mess in so quickly I only knew it was happening by the rush of texture out of me, and the barbed-wire contractions that escorted it.

As a child I begged to see the birth canal in the video my mother and aunt watched before the arrival of my third ghost-sibling, who'd soon dissolve into the murky clots of miscarriage. It had been a watery, spacious expanse in my mind—a canal of safe passage—not the seizing catapult of reality. My own baby boy clung to me from inside, taking an amniotic inhale on the way out: neonatal pneumonia.

I thought the devil would be towering, imposing. Instead she emerged from the hospital shower behind me, a slinking shadow cloaked in my grandmother's patchwork afghan, its colors folding around her like the soggy wings of a newly emerged butterfly; despite her posture, a cold, chemical heat flashed from inside the gaunt eye sockets, slow simmering after a 36 hour labor that had started in a steady drizzle and ended in a torrent of overlapping contractions and a slippery infant was expelled in two howling pushes—though the doctor had told me to direct that intensity inward. He had no idea.

To grow its new body, the caterpillar digests each juvenile cell: self-cannibalism

Like a turn signal left on long after the lane-change, I asked every passing nurse when I could hold my boy again—they'd only let me look through the plastic dome in the NICU, pumping oxygen overtime into those larval lungs. Instead they hooked me up to a mechanical pumping machine that left my areolas bloated cherries. By the end of the first day, thimblefuls of sticky yellow colostrum relented to the extraction. My mother cried, called it liquid gold, said I was a natural.

Every two hours the hungry plastic mouths latched and I held my breath until the creamy pinpricks materialized, fogging up the nozzle of the pump. That devil sat next to me the whole time, wearing the rhinestone encrusted flip-flops I'd bought in preparation for the hospital shower. Next to the bed, *Wake up*, she'd growl, *Feed, bitch*. She'd follow me to the bathroom. Back home without the baby, one night I dropped the four-ounce bottle of milk affixed to my breast, and before me the vision materialized: the skin of that baby peeling from the amniotic sac, no milkfat plumping its folds, my arms—my mother's arms—empty. I yanked the plastic tubes from the breasts, screamed and threw the bottles against the wall. The devil stood, pointed, and I crawled along the floor, weeping, to retrieve the bottles. *That's right, get it out*, she said.

An imbalance in the proper enzymes and the caterpillar hangs soft. No protective chrysalis, no velveteen wings: just translucent stillness.

At the end of a week the insatiable machine left my breasts engorged bags stuffed to the brim with marbles, and by the time I held my boy again, I was so flesh-starved I never said no when he started smacking his lips. That didn't stop his wailing every afternoon: his eyes hot with that same stove-burner blue, and both their mouths contorted into hollow, begging caverns. As if in prayer, my breasts warmed, grew full, but he'd never latch during one of these fits. One afternoon, the sun ripping through the west-facing window, during my boy's convicted howl-

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

ing, I left him in the crib we never used and slammed the bedroom behind me. I beat my fists on the hardwood floor outside and clawed at my skin until I drew blood, let my head hit the floor as my body went limp. The devil put her head on my belly so it bobbed up and down with my heaves. *That's right*, she said, *just let it out*. And afterward she pulled me up, gingerly, opened the bedroom door and led me to the crib. This time my boy latched, but I could still see the seething behind the milk-eyed stupor. He let himself be draped over my shoulder for the burping, and all the time I felt the cloying pressure of a phantom hand on my own back. Eventually our breath melded and we were three curved spines there laced together with oxygen: my body, six arms, framed by the mirrored demons; my wings.